

CRANBERRIES

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A Vision of Cranberry Bogs

By TONY KELSO

The 2004 cranberry harvest is on, and predictions are for a better harvest than recent tough years. Stephen Nye Gifford, the original cranberry farmer in Duxbury, would probably be pleased to see the beautiful scarlet bogs that still dot Duxbury. Our local cranberry bogs seem so much a part of the landscape it is hard to believe that cranberry farming in Duxbury is less than 160 years old.



Cranberry picking in the early days was a family affair on the bogs along Temple St. - Photo courtesy of *Duxbury Old Album*, published by DR&HS.

The cranberry has, of course, been around Duxbury for centuries. The wild cranberry can be found in low swampy areas and was known by the local Native Americans and the early settlers. The red berries were also brought in water in barrels on long sea voyages and made into a tart sauce for the crew. This helped prevent scurvy, the vitamin C deficiency disease.

The idea of commercial cultivation of cranberries began on Cape Cod about 1820, but it wasn't until 1845 that the idea took hold in Duxbury. Stephen Nye Gifford was a 30-year-old forward thinking schoolteacher in 1845, when he began experimenting with raising cranberries to sell. He took a well-watered cedar swamp on the corner of Temple and Church Streets and pulled stumps, cut bushes, brought in sand from a nearby sandbank, and leveled the peat soil of the bog. He then planted vines and was rewarded with the first cultivated commercial cranberry crop. What is remarkable is that same cranberry bog is still fruitful today in 2004.

Gifford's life was a Horatio Alger story. He was born in 1815 and came from a poor Pembroke family. After his father died when he was ten, he was put out to make his way in the world. He farmed and made shoes like many local boys did then who didn't go sea. He clearly longed for more, and somehow got himself a higher education from academies in Hanover, New Hampshire and Bridgewater, Massachusetts. He then taught in Duxbury's one-room schoolhouses and eventually opened a private school that lasted until 1850. It was dur-

ing this time that he became interested in cranberries. Whether it was to supplement his salary as a teacher or a natural curiosity, Gifford is credited with bringing the crimson tide to Duxbury's attention.

After 1850 he went on to a political career in Massachusetts politics that culminated in a 30-year job as the clerk for the Massachusetts State Senate. He was one of the movers and shakers of the 1870s who influenced the French Atlantic cable and the railroad to come to Duxbury. He also saw the real estate potential in cottages and a wooden bridge for Duxbury beach. He was a Gilded Age entrepreneur, and cranberry growing fit right into those ideas. He died unexpectedly of pneumonia at age 70 in 1886, still a Duxbury cranberry bog owner.

By 1879 cranberry meadows and cranberry marshes, as the bogs were originally called, were planted in several Duxbury locations. John Loring was the first to make a commercial success of his bogs that lay along Enterprise Street/ Route 3A near the Marshfield town line. But it took time and money to make these bogs work. The bogs that are north of Church Street down some winding dirt lanes were other early profitable cranberry bogs.

As 1900 drew near, an area where that was a low-lying area with swampy acid soil and sand nearby became a bog. Longtime Duxbury residents will remember the small bog that lay just off the railroad tracks near the Millbrook station on Railroad Avenue that lasted until the 1930s. By 1937, Duxbury had 600 acres of cranberry bogs under cultivation that yielded approximately 36,000 bushels of cranberries. The story of the picking of cranberries and in particular the Cape Verdean families who settled in Duxbury to work the bogs is a story for a future column.

Cranberry bogs without proper care begin to revert to the wilds within a couple of years. The Camp Wing conservation land has a number of bogs gone wild and the town-owned Garside bogs that wrap around Plantation Drive and can be seen from Route 3 South just before the Route 14 exit are just a few examples. It took vision and daring for Stephen Nye Gifford and the other early Duxbury cranberry growers to persevere and turn cedar swamps into cranberry bogs. That daring continues today with Duxbury's longtime families who work the bogs despite the hardships of early frosts, bad crops and depressed markets.